



FINDING
GROUNDING IN
THE CHAOS

Dalia Halabi

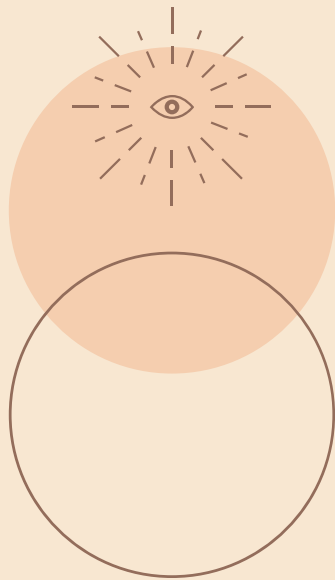


Welcome

As an Arab American, I understand the deep emotional toll that comes with watching our people, families, and communities struggle in times of conflict. The distance can feel like a heavy burden—we carry the pain, the worry, and sometimes, the helplessness of not being able to do more. During these moments of escalating violence and uncertainty in the Middle East, it's normal to feel overwhelmed. The constant stream of news, the devastation, and the fear for loved ones back home can trigger intense anxiety and exhaustion.

This workbook is my way of offering you practical support—a guide to help you find grounding when everything around you feels unstable. The tools and exercises within will help you create a space of calm in the chaos, connect with your emotions, and regulate your nervous system. While we may not be able to change the world in a day, we can take care of ourselves so we're able to sustain our resilience and advocacy over the long term. You are not alone in this.

Understanding the psychological toll



The Impact of Watching Conflict and Violence

When we consume media filled with violence and conflict, our brain is constantly reacting to perceived danger. Even though we are not physically present in the conflict, our brain's threat response system—particularly the amygdala—is activated, putting us in a heightened state of alertness.

This chronic activation leads to:

- **Compassion Fatigue:** Compassion fatigue arises when our capacity to empathize is drained due to prolonged exposure to others' suffering. Unlike burnout, which comes from general exhaustion, compassion fatigue specifically depletes our ability to feel and act empathetically, leaving us feeling emotionally numb.
- **Secondary Trauma (Vicarious Trauma):** While primary trauma affects individuals directly experiencing harm, secondary trauma occurs when we are indirectly exposed to trauma, such as through media. Symptoms can mimic those of PTSD, including intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, and avoidance.
- **Nervous System Dysregulation:** Continuous exposure to distress can overwhelm the autonomic nervous system, leading to dysregulation. This may manifest as anxiety, irritability, and an inability to focus or rest.

Self-Check-In:

Take a moment to consider the last time you consumed distressing news. What were your immediate physical, emotional, and cognitive reactions?

- Where did you feel tension in your body?
- Did you notice your mind ruminating on certain images or stories?
- What emotions came up, and how did you manage them?

Common Emotional Reactions to Violence and Injustice

When we witness violence, whether in person or through media, it can evoke powerful emotions that impact our mental health. It's important to recognize these reactions as normal responses to abnormal situations. Understanding them is the first step toward healing.

1. Helplessness and Powerlessness

Violence, particularly when it feels uncontrollable or far away, can evoke a profound sense of helplessness. We may feel powerless to change the situation, which often leads to:

- **Despair:** A sense of hopelessness that things will never improve.
- **Paralysis:** The feeling that no action you take will make a difference, leading to inaction.

2. Anger and Fury

Injustice naturally stirs anger, particularly when it feels deeply unfair or avoidable. This anger may manifest in:

- **Rage:** Directed at those responsible or at the systems that allow the violence.
- **Frustration:** When we feel our efforts to fight against the injustice are blocked or ignored.

3. Grief and Sorrow

Watching innocent people suffer often evokes profound grief. We mourn the loss of safety, lives, and the sense of fairness in the world. This can lead to:

- **Emotional Numbness:** To protect ourselves from feeling overwhelmed by grief, we may shut down emotionally.
- **Deep Sadness:** A pervasive sense of sorrow for the people and places affected by the violence.

4. Anxiety and Fear

Violence can trigger a deep-seated sense of fear for safety. This fear may manifest as:

- **Hypervigilance:** A heightened state of alertness where you're constantly scanning for threats.
- **Worry for the Future:** Concerns about how the violence will escalate and what it means for the world or your loved ones.

5. Guilt and Shame

Witnessing suffering from a distance, especially from a position of relative safety, can evoke feelings of guilt or shame. Thoughts like "Why them and not me?" or "Am I doing enough?" may arise.

Self-Check-in:

Reflect on your own emotions in response to witnessing violence or injustice. Which emotions resonate most with your experience? How do they manifest in your body and mind?



The importance of Self Care

Many people, especially those who care deeply about social justice and humanitarian causes, fall into the trap of thinking self-care is selfish when others are suffering. However, self-care is essential for sustained action and preventing burnout. Without replenishing our emotional reserves, we become less effective in our advocacy and daily life.

Cognitive Dissonance in Crisis Times

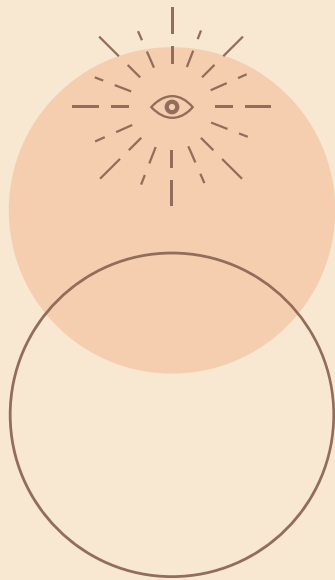
A psychological phenomenon that often arises during times of crisis is cognitive dissonance—the mental discomfort experienced when our values or beliefs are in conflict with our actions. For example, we may value empathy and justice but feel helpless or inactive, creating internal tension. This dissonance can make us feel like we're not doing enough, exacerbating stress.

Self-Check-In:

When was the last time you judged yourself for “not doing enough” in response to a crisis? What inner beliefs or values were at play? How did this judgment affect your mental state and behavior?

By engaging in self-care, we not only soothe the nervous system, but we also cultivate resilience. A well-regulated individual is more capable of thoughtful, strategic action, rather than impulsive reactions driven by fear or guilt.

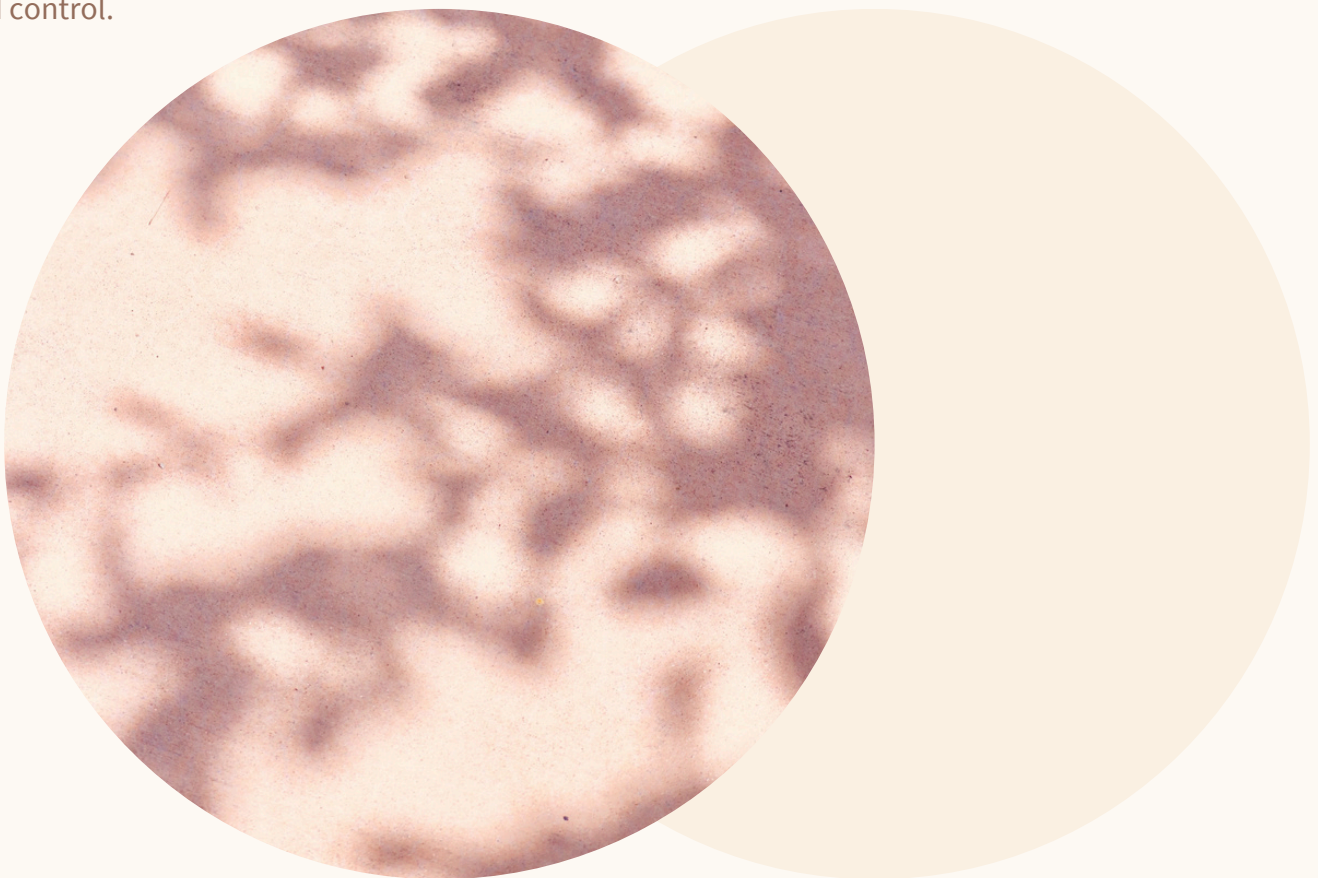
Grounding



The Science Behind Grounding

Grounding is a psychological and somatic intervention designed to reconnect individuals with the present moment, drawing their attention away from distressing thoughts, memories, or overwhelming emotions. Grounding techniques help regulate the nervous system by shifting our focus from a state of emotional overwhelm (typically triggered by the sympathetic nervous system) to a state of calm and control.

Grounding can be cognitive, sensory, or somatic. The key idea is to interrupt the cycle of anxious, catastrophic, or emotionally dysregulated thinking and return to a state of emotional equilibrium. By engaging our sensory experiences (touch, sight, sound), we remind the brain and body that the present moment is safe and manageable, reducing the physiological impact of stress.



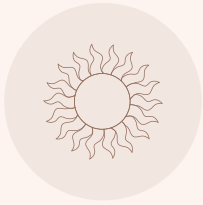


Grounding as a Powerful Intervention

From a psychological perspective, grounding is one of the most accessible, immediate, and effective tools for:

- **Reducing Anxiety:** Grounding brings attention back to the body or surroundings, which helps disengage from the cyclical, anxious thoughts often exacerbated by news of conflict or chaos.
- **Managing Trauma Symptoms:** For individuals experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress or secondary trauma, grounding offers a way to break free from flashbacks, dissociation, or emotional flooding.
- **Regulating the Nervous System:** Grounding techniques, particularly sensory-based ones, help shift the body from the sympathetic (fight or flight) to the parasympathetic state (rest and digest), promoting calm and healing.

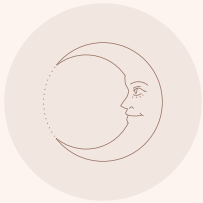
Types of Grounding



Cognitive

This type of grounding brings focus to your mental space, such as focusing on lists, facts, or the logical aspect of things to shift attention from distressing emotions.

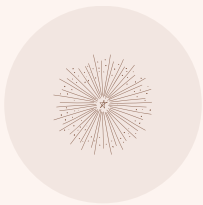
- Example: Mentally name five things you can see, hear, and touch in your current environment.



Sensory

This method uses the five senses to connect you back to the present moment, engaging parts of the brain that are less connected to trauma and more tied to sensation and immediate reality.

- Example: Hold an object and describe its texture, shape, and temperature. Feel it fully with your fingers to bring your awareness into the present.

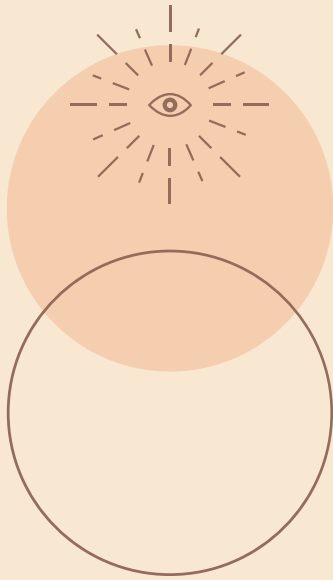


Somatic

Body-focused grounding engages the physical body as a means to reconnect with the present moment. This can be particularly helpful for those who experience dissociation or emotional overwhelm.

- Example: Grounding through Earthing—step outside, take off your shoes, and feel the earth beneath your feet. This practice not only engages your senses but also helps align your body with the natural world.

Tools





The SIFT Method:

Grounding Through Sensory Awareness

This tool allows you to process the emotional intensity you feel by moving your attention to your sensory experiences, helping to reconnect your mind and body.

SIFT stands for Sensation, Image, Feeling, and Thought. In the face of distressing emotions or images from violent news, go through these steps:

Question & Answer

Sensation: What physical sensations are you experiencing?

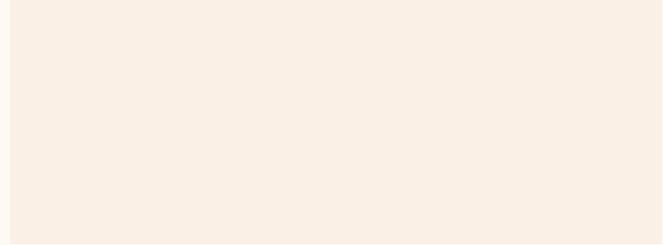
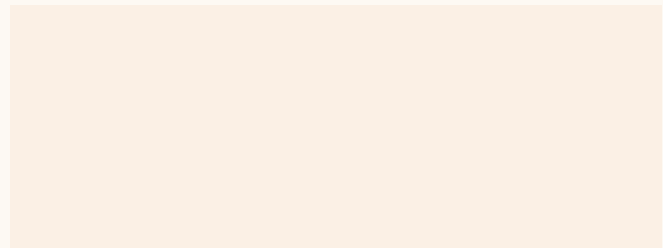
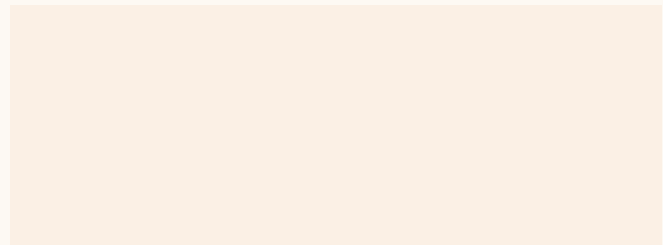


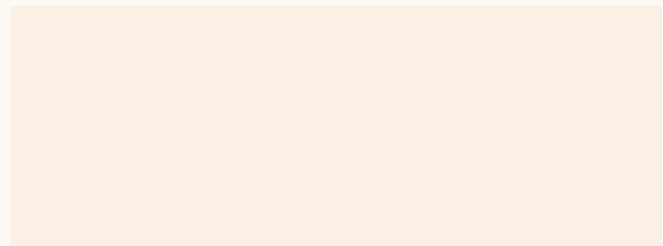
Image: What images are stuck in your mind from what you've witnessed?



Feeling: Name the emotion that's arising. Is it fear, anger, or grief?



Thought: What thoughts are swirling in your mind related to what you've seen?





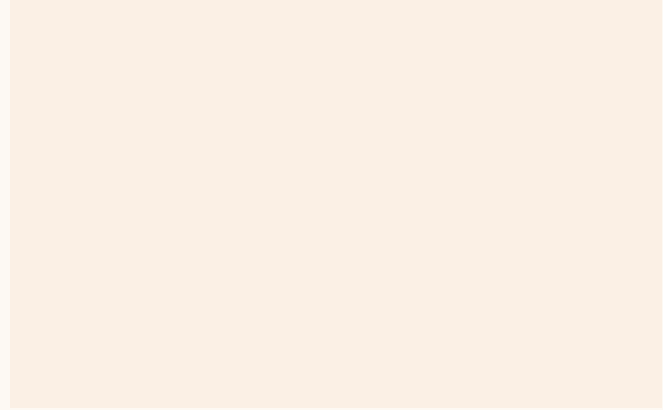


The ABC Technique (Cognitive Restructuring)

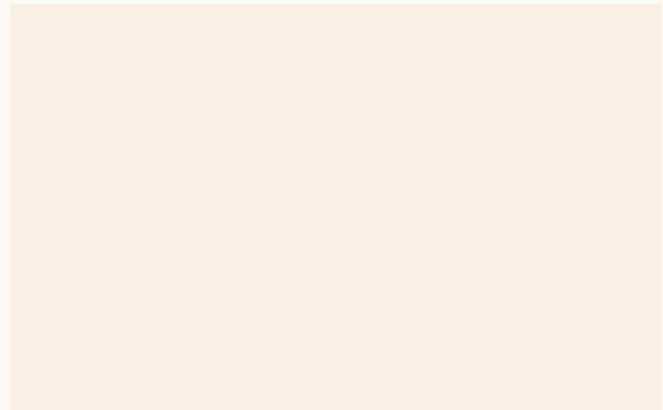
This CBT-based technique helps challenge distressing thoughts related to conflict or crisis and allows you to reframe them into more balanced thoughts.

Question & Answer

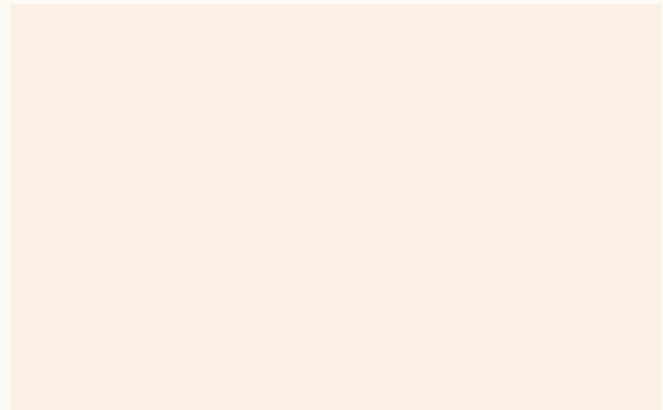
A (Activating Event): What specifically triggered your emotional response?



B (Beliefs): What automatic beliefs or thoughts arose from this event? Were they rational or catastrophic?

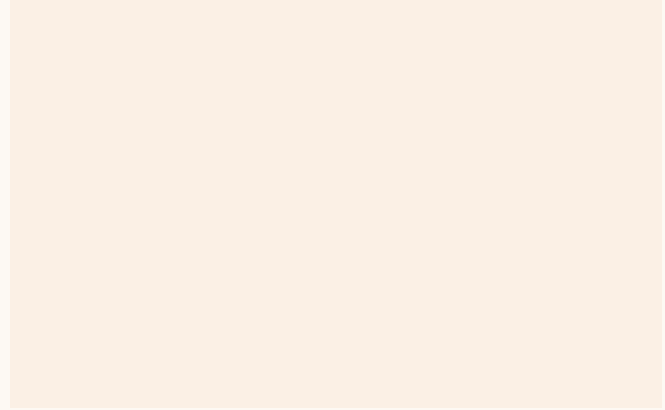


C (Consequences): How did those beliefs influence your emotions and behavior?

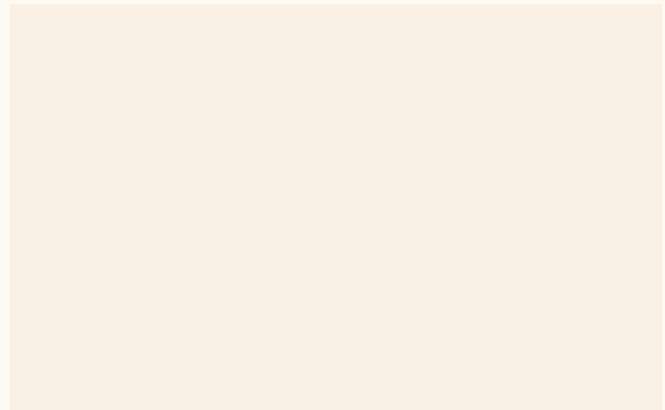


After identifying the ABCs, challenge your beliefs by asking:

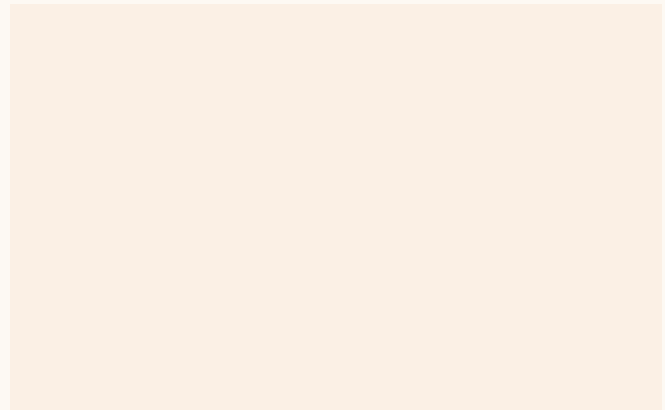
Is this belief based on facts or assumptions?



What evidence supports a different perspective?



What would be a more balanced way of viewing this event?







Intentional news consumption

Instead of passively consuming distressing information, practice intentional news consumption. Set boundaries around how much time you spend watching news coverage. Constant exposure amplifies distress. Consider setting specific times to check the news (e.g., 10 minutes in the morning), and avoid consuming media before bed.

Choose the time and medium that best supports your emotional well-being.

Studies show that consuming media in short, structured intervals helps reduce emotional overwhelm.

Schedule a specific time each day to check the news.

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Journalling Prompts

When emotions become overwhelming, what strategies do you use to cope? Are these strategies healthy, or do they create more stress? (Examine your coping strategies. Are they grounding, self-compassionate approaches, or do they lean toward avoidance or numbing behaviors?)

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Journalling Prompts

Now, take a deep breath and list three grounding techniques you could use in those moments to regain a sense of control. How might these tools help you reconnect with your inner strength and focus on what you can do in the face of adversity?

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Journalling Prompts

List concrete actions that you can take, such as advocating, donating, or supporting others. How might these actions shift your emotional state?

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Additional tools

Grounding through movement

- Try shaking your arms and legs for 30 seconds.
- Go for a short mindful walk, paying attention to the movement of your feet on the ground, the air on your skin, and the rhythm of your steps.
- **Prompt: After using grounding through movement, how did your emotional state change? Did the act of moving your body help release any emotional tension?**

Polyvagal-Informed Grounding Technique

- Find a comfortable, quiet space where you can sit or lie down.
- Take three deep breaths, emphasizing a long, slow exhale to signal safety to your nervous system.
- Gently touch your throat, chest, or abdomen (this provides somatic reassurance).
- Visualize a moment where you felt safe, connected, and at peace. Immerse yourself in that memory—what do you see, hear, and feel?
- Allow your body to soften into this sense of safety, releasing the tension held by the sympathetic nervous system.
- **Prompt: What signals of safety does your body respond to most? (E.g., specific sounds, touch, environments)**



Meditation Practice

Getting Started

Find a comfortable seat, with your feet flat on the floor or crossed if you're seated on the ground. Close your eyes, take a deep breath in through your nose, and slowly exhale through your mouth.

Body Awareness

Gently bring your attention to your body. Notice where you feel tension or discomfort, and breathe deeply into those areas. As you exhale, release any tightness.

Grounding Visualization

Imagine roots growing from your feet or the base of your spine, reaching deep into the earth. Feel the stability and support of the ground beneath you. With each breath, let the earth's energy rise through those roots, filling you with calm and strength.

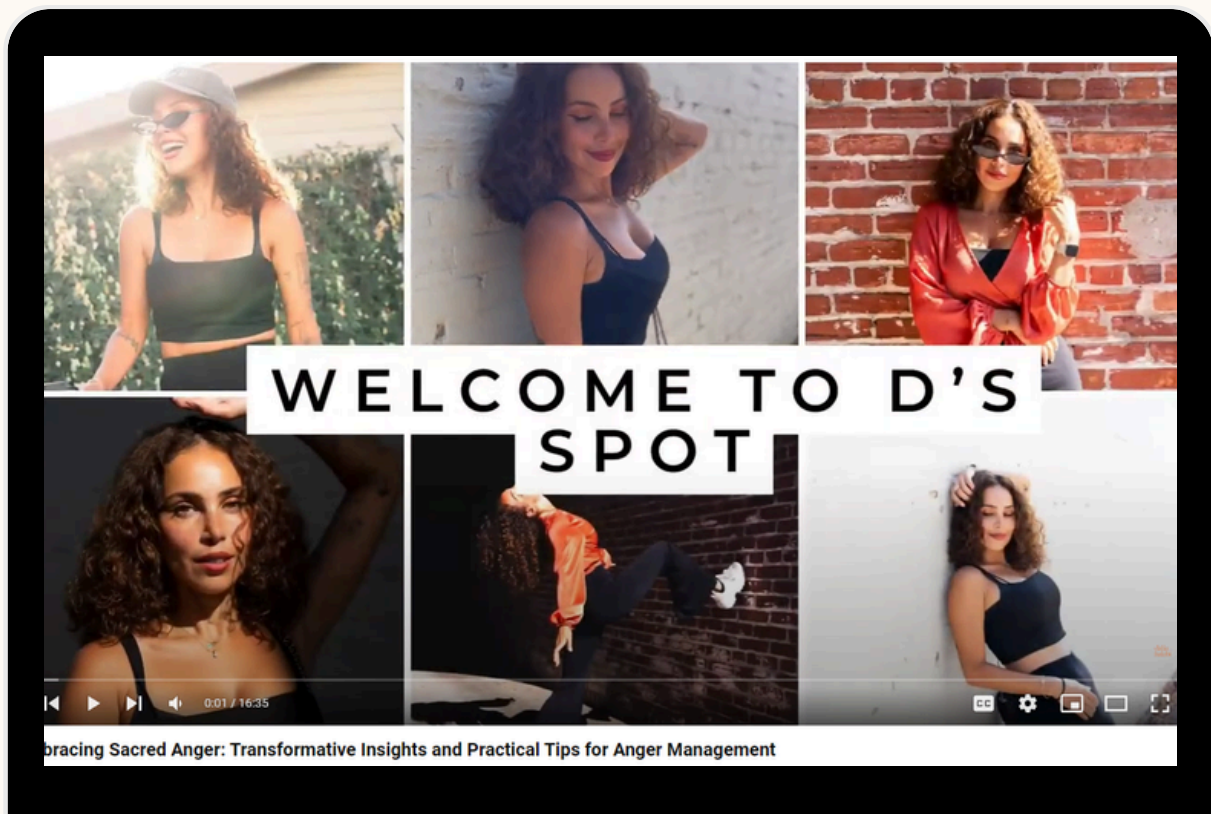
Letting Go of Emotions

Allow any emotions—stress, fear, sadness—to surface. Breathe into them without judgment. On your exhale, release them into the ground, trusting that the earth can absorb and transform them.

Closing

Take a final deep breath, feeling grounded and present. When you're ready, gently open your eyes, bringing this sense of calm with you.

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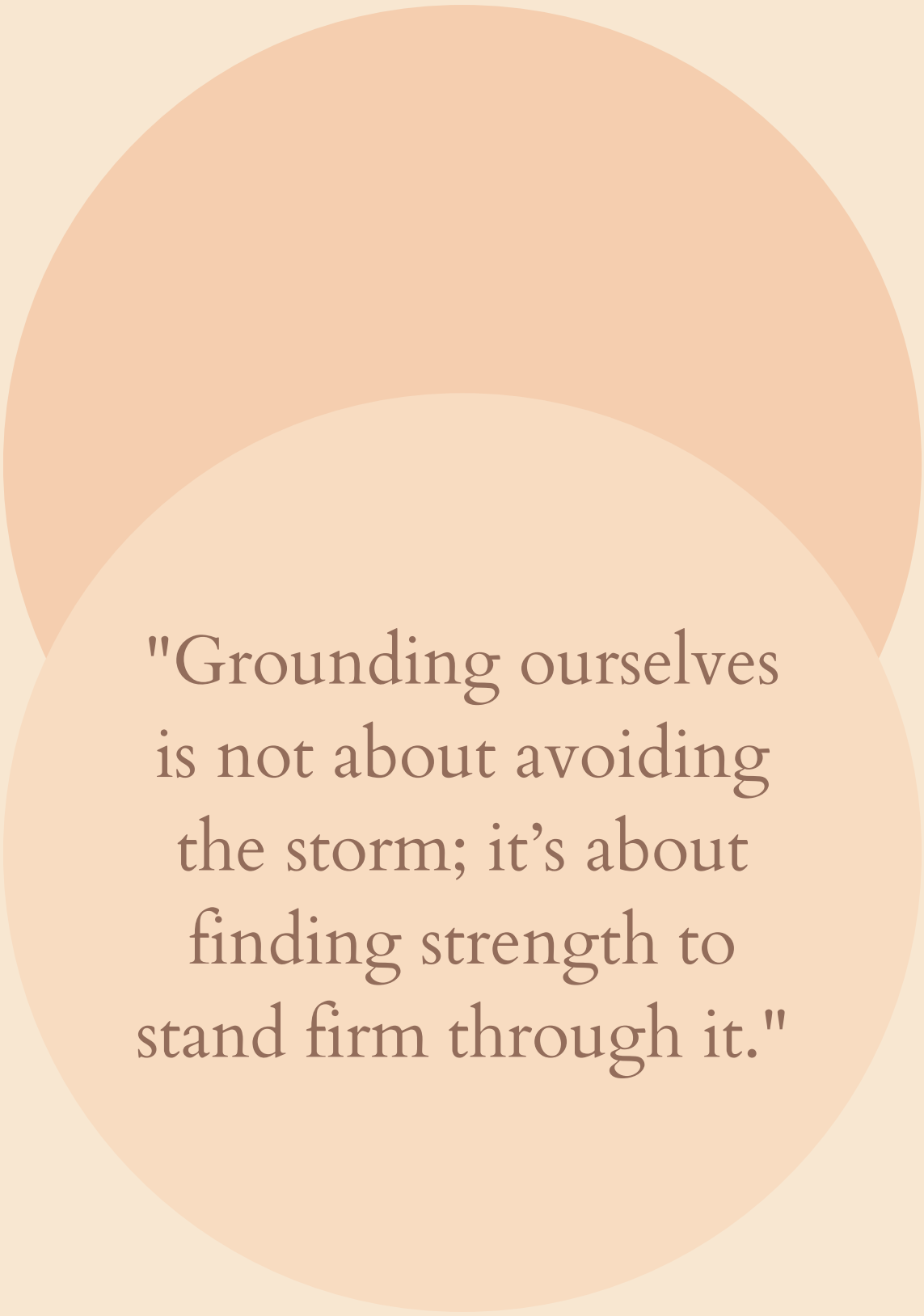


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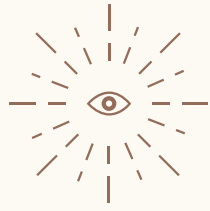


"Grounding ourselves
is not about avoiding
the storm; it's about
finding strength to
stand firm through it."

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*"We may not control the chaos, but we can
control how we respond to it."*

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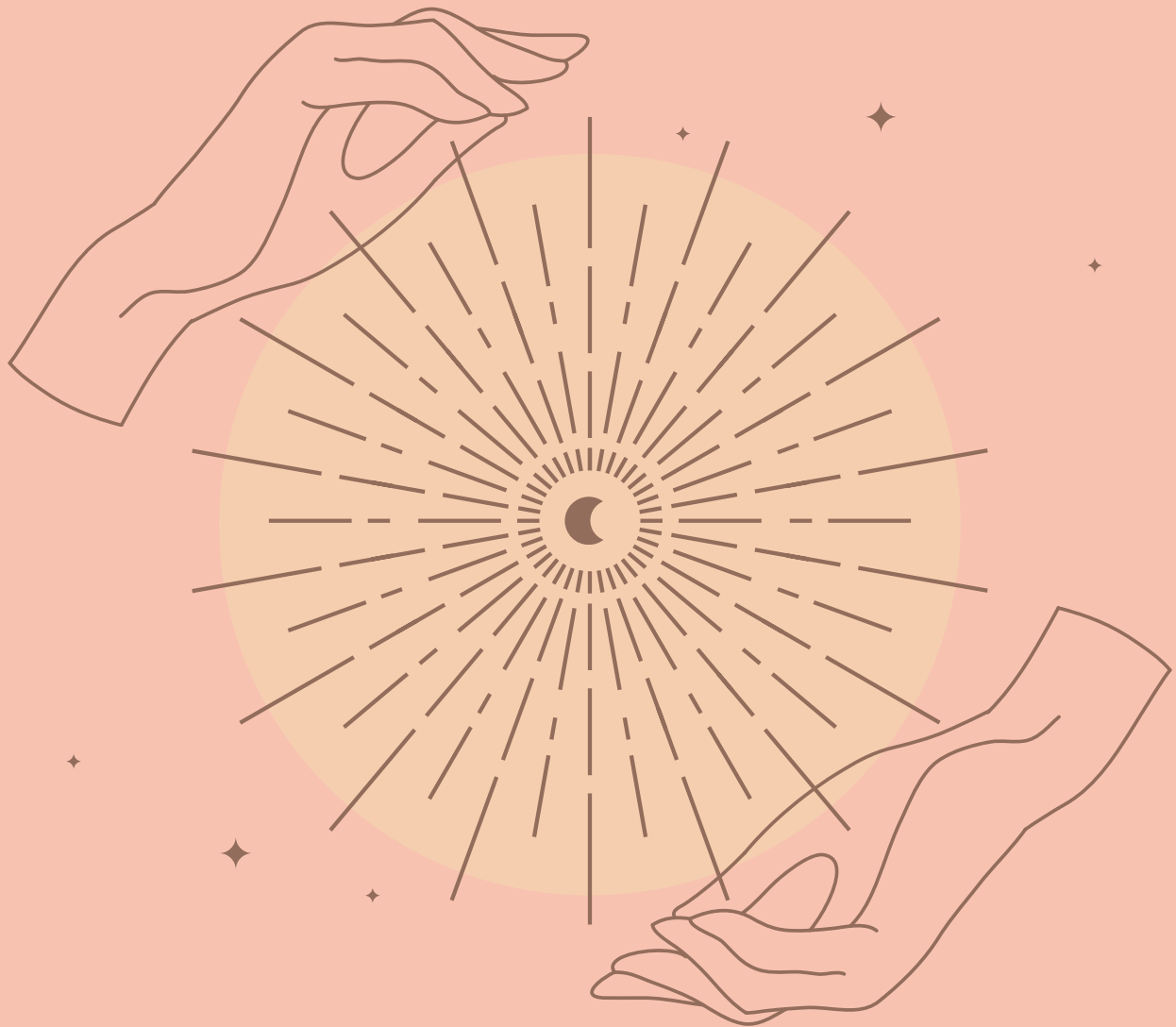


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Thank You

Thank you for taking the time to explore this workbook. In a world filled with chaos and uncertainty, it's vital to pause, reflect, and reconnect with ourselves. I hope the tools, insights, and practices shared here empower you to navigate your emotions and cultivate a sense of grounding in your life.

Your journey towards self-care and resilience is important, not only for you but for the communities you touch. Remember, you have the strength to make a difference in your own life and the lives of others.

As you continue on this path, I invite you to reach out for support. I offer free consultations to explore how we can work together to deepen your self-care practice and address any challenges you may be facing.

May you find peace, empowerment, and clarity as you move forward.

With gratitude,
Dalia Halabi